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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the outcomes of a study that investigated teacher perceptions of the educational value of the Indiana Assessment System of Educational Proficiencies (IASEP) as an effective tool used to evaluate educational progress for students with moderate and severe disabilities. Fifteen teachers of students with moderate and severe disabilities participating in the statewide alternative assessment IASEP were surveyed. Analysis of the survey, follow-up interviews, and questionnaires brought to light significant limitations and benefits of IASEP according to the respondents. Overall, a significant number of respondents rated the IASEP as too subjective and arbitrary to be a good evaluative tool to track the educational progress of students with moderate and severe disabilities. The results also indicate that IASEP is not an adequate tool to use to measure best practices and accountability. However, the IASEP Standards and Essential Skills used in the rating rubrics were rated as a high quality tool program design for students with moderate and severe disabilities. Appendices include survey materials. (CR)

Running Head: EFFECTIVENESS OF ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

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The Effectiveness of Alternative Assessment As An Evaluation Tool For Students

With Severe Disabilities

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Abstract

This paper presents teacher perceptions of the educational value of the Indiana Assessment System of Educational Proficiencies (IASEP) as an effective tool used to evaluate educational progress for students with moderate and severe disabilities. The potential benefits and limitations of IASEP in alignment with best practices, accountability, and program design will also be discussed. Results for two of the four items were statistically significant. The effectiveness of the alternative assessment as an effective tool to measure educational progress was perceived as tedious and too subjective. Teacher opinions ranked IASEP as a high quality tool in regards to program design. However, teachers ranked IASEP low as a tool to demonstrate accountability and best practices.

Introduction

Assessment is currently a controversy in both general and special education circles and at state and district levels. Educational assessment is undergoing some profound changes. Given the perceived limitations of traditional assessments, assessment specialists are looking for ways to create valid performance-based assessment tools. Some of the ways that are being considered are electronic portfolios, open-ended questions that require students to use critical thinking skills, and student exhibitions and culminating activities. The goal of these newer assessments is to more accurately depict what students can do, in more problem solving and higher order thinking and writing skills (Kleinhart, 1999).

The difficulties of adequately assessing individuals with severe disabilities have been well documented. Many individuals with severe disabilities have limited physical, sensory, and communicative behaviors that seriously hinder their ability to attain scores within the normal developmental ranges (Downing & Perino, 1992).

With the passage of the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) in 1997, all states are required to ensure that students with disabilities fully participate in state and local measures of accountability by July 2000. IDEA states that students with moderate and severe disabilities who cannot be included within regular state and local educational assessments and accountability measures are required to participate in the alternative assessment.

The purpose of this action research project is to discover what teachers think about the new alternative assessment mandated by the IDEA for students with Moderate and Severe disabilities. To meet these requirements the state of Indiana has adopted the alternative assessment program, Indiana Assessment System of Educational Proficiencies (IASEP). A small percentage of students with disabilities, approximately 15%, are currently participating in the new statewide alternative assessment.

This new alternative assessment raises two questions: (1) How do teachers feel about the effectiveness of IASEP as a tool to evaluate the educational progress of students with moderate and severe disabilities? and (2) How does IASEP show the abilities of students with moderate and severe disabilities in alignment to best practices, accountability and program design?

Literature Review

Assessment is critically analyzing and definitively judging the nature, significance, status or merit of a person, place, or thing. Assessment in special education is collecting data to make decisions about a student (Hughes, 1998). Assessment is not synonymous with testing; however, testing is a major part of the assessment process. There are five major purposes most educational authorities will agree upon in the use of assessment: (a) screening and referral; (b) eligibility, program placement and classification; (c) instructional planning; (d) monitoring pupil progress; and (e) evaluating program effectiveness (Hughes, 1998).

Accountability means showing both those inside and outside of school whether students are making progress. The driving force of standardized assessments is two-fold. First, they are linked to the curriculum, instructional practices, and remediation being taught by teachers daily. Second, they provide information that feeds the accountability system. Students who are tested count in the information used by policy makers to make decisions about curriculum; allocation of resources; and development of school, district or state policies about the instructional process. Assessment measures and practices typically are normed on students with no handicaps. The tests require students to use all of their senses; vision, hearing, speech, and manipulation of objects. Little, if any, modification is allowed (Downing & Perino, 1992). These are the assessments from which students with moderate and severe disabilities are excluded. Students who are not assessed do not count as part of this process.

Educators and administrators give a variety of reasons not to include students with disabilities from state and local assessments yet continue to make decisions and create educational policies that affect their instruction.

However, Kentucky's Inclusive Assessment and Accountability System is one of the few models that we can draw guidance for the development of alternative assessments or what impact it will have on instructional practices. Since 1992, it has included all students, even students with the most severe disabilities. In the state's system developed under the landmark Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA), most students with disabilities participated in the regular assessment system, which to date has included writing

portfolios; on-demand achievement tasks in math, social studies, reading, science, practical living, and arts and humanities; as well as more traditional achievement test items (Kearns, Kleinhart, Clayton, Burdge & Williams, 1998).

Research is limited on whether performance-based assessments translate into significant positive changes in instructional practice for students without disabilities. Teachers in Vermont and Pittsburgh reported that they valued portfolios and were able to integrate the new assessments into their daily classroom routines. However, teachers in Great Britain were not enthusiastic about a national performance based assessment. They viewed the assessment as more work and time taken from teaching and as wholly separate from the daily routine (Kleinhart & Kennedy, 1998).

Research conducted by doctoral students during the early years of implementation found that teachers had not made changes to their instructional practices or basic lessons as a result of Kentucky's high-stakes performance-based assessment and accountability system. Neither study did not consider the impact of an alternative assessment for students with disabilities who were unable to participate in the state or district's regular assessment program (even with appropriate accommodations); IDEA'S mandate for the implementation of such alternative assessments for students with disabilities makes this research imperative.

Although considerable criticism of standardized tests and testing procedures exist for this special population little if any empirical research has been conducted to support or deny alternative assessments (Downing & Perino,

1992). To date, the research compiled here shows no significant conclusions, either for or against alternative assessments and their success rates for students with moderate and severe disabilities. The schools that participated in Kentucky's assessment and accountability system, however, received their respective successes as a collaborative special education model of assessment and instructional programming. The lessons that can be learned from the Kentucky model is that it has demonstrated success for students with disabilities in the context of the first inclusive assessment and accountability system in the United States (Kearns, Kleinhart, Clayton, Burdge & Williams, 1998). As we all struggle with the new IDEA mandates, Kentucky's experiences will continue to provide helpful strategies and insights in the development of alternative assessments for students with moderate and severe disabilities.

Method

Participants

There are 19 teachers of students with moderate and severe disabilities programs participating in the statewide alternative assessment IASEP. However, due to one staff change mid-year and no past experience with the IASEP program and I being the researcher of this project decided not to include the two aforementioned teachers in this study. Therefore, a total of 17 participants were targeted and received the cover letter and initial two-page survey. Out of 17 teachers and two rounds of correspondence 15 teachers volunteered and became respondents in this research. The return rate was an overwhelming

88%. Eight of the respondents are elementary school teachers, three are middle school teachers and four are high school teachers.

The district where the research was conducted is considered an urban area that is ethnically made up of African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian families. Economically, it is considered a low-income area. Many of the families are transient and move numerous times throughout the school year.

Materials

Materials used to collect the data included the *IASEP Use and Support Questionnaire* (see Appendix A) given to all IASEP participants statewide, an interview form (see Appendix B) developed by the researcher to gather additional data and a final two-question survey that was needed to extend the analysis (see Appendix C).

Procedures

The participants were given three weeks to fill out the initial two-page survey and return it to the researcher. A follow-up fax transmittal was sent to five respondents three weeks later. Four of those five respondents did not return their surveys during the first round. One of the five respondents needed to complete page two of the survey that was overlooked.

After the surveys were reviewed and analyzed an informal interview was conducted with each respondent. The purpose of the interview portion was to elaborate and clarify the answers given on the survey that were unclear to the researcher and to ask about demographic information on each respondent's

classroom. The interview form was not seen by the interviewee but was used as a tool in organizing and gathering additional data from the respondents.

The researcher extended the analysis by sending out a third and final questionnaire with the two questions the researcher was asking in this action research project. The respondents had five days to return their answers to the researcher either by filling out the questionnaire or being interviewed by phone.

Results

Findings

Analysis of the *IASEP Use and Support Questionnaire*, follow-up interview and questionnaire brought to light significant limitations and benefits of IASEP according to the respondents. Overall a significant number of respondents rated IASEP as too subjective and arbitrary to be a good evaluative tool to track the educational progress of students with moderate and severe disabilities. The results also indicate that IASEP is not an adequate tool to use to measure best practices and accountability. However, the IASEP Standards and Essential Skills used in the rating rubrics were rated as a high quality tool in regards to program design for students with moderate and severe disabilities.

Results from the *IASEP Use and Support Questionnaire* 38% of the respondents felt “somewhat uncomfortable” with using the peripheral equipment (i.e. digital cameras, scanners, and audio devices) to collect and enter data into the IASEP program. Nearly half (49%) of the respondents felt well prepared by the teacher trainings and 56% of the respondents felt “somewhat adequate” about the level of ongoing support that they have received in the past year.

Forty-two percent indicated that integrating computer technology into the classroom was “not a barrier”. As an evaluative tool 60% of respondents indicated that IASEP’s rating of proficiencies and essential skills are not effective as an educational tool.

When asked about their opinions concerning best practices and accountability, 20% of respondents indicated that these theories were based on teacher choice, personal beliefs and values, and professional ethics. No assessment now or in the future would ever be able to assess these principles. Eighty percent of the respondents did not address these two points specifically when answering the question.

However, when asked to correlate IASEP Standards with program design 90% of respondents felt that it was an excellent tool as a guide in determining the needs of students with even the most severe disabilities.

Discussion

Interpretations

The effectiveness of assessment instruments and procedures are critical for determining student strengths and limitations and intervention needs. However, respondents participating in the IASEP program feel that at this time there are more limitations than benefits to the program.

A large number of respondents indicated that time is a factor. One respondent said, “It’s [the program] overly, overly time consuming” (personal interview, March 20, 2001). Another respondent put it this way, “[We] need more time to do [implement] it the right way” (personal interview, March 27, 2001).

Another limitation is that the proficiencies and essential skills are too general and broad and need to be broken down into smaller steps for even the students with the lowest ability levels. Students with Moderate and Severe disabilities sometimes work on the same goals and benchmarks for years. There progress is slow and often stagnant. It is difficult to see whether IASEP is an appropriate tool to measure the students educational progress, when in fact, such minimal progress is made during one school year. Along with time constraints and the proficiencies being too general, respondents indicated that IASEP is too subjective and arbitrary. IASEP relies too heavily on the teachers experience, professionalism, honesty and knowledge of his/her students. One respondent said this, " My interpretation and view of a students functional level will be different than your view and interpretation of that same student"(personal interview, April 5, 2001).

Although the research suggests that there are more limitations than benefits to the IASEP program it does have some support from teachers who feel that the program has its saving graces. There are benefits with IASEP as well. Those teachers that are more proficient with computers and more comfortable with the peripheral equipment needed to document students progress find that IASEP makes more sense than the state mandated ISTEP test for students with moderate disabilities. They feel that it is easy to use, detailed, and liked the idea of "showing" the parents their child's progress though video and audio taping and scanning in finished work.

Most teachers felt that IASEP was an effective tool in alignment with program design. It is a good guide for setting goals and benchmarks and shows consistency in the classroom and throughout the district from the elementary program to the high school program. Once IASEP's standards are used consistently throughout the district beginning with students in the first grade and following through to high school graduation, we will know if its benefits outweigh its present limitations.

Suggestions for Future Research

In order to assess if IASEP is an appropriate tool to evaluate the educational progress of students with moderate and severe disabilities a longitudinal study must be done. Tracking these students beginning in first grade throughout their educational careers to completion high school will give us a well-rounded assessment of IASEP. It will take years before we know for sure if IASEP is an appropriate educational evaluation. According to this research it is too soon to tell.

Summary

The questions and issues surrounding assessment and accountability abound. The answers have not been easily forthcoming but we know that the learning and progress of all students and those with disabilities is at the top of the nation's agenda.

This action research study was an attempt to determine whether teacher's viewed IASEP as an effective tool used to evaluate educational progress of students with moderate and severe disabilities. Currently, teacher's perceptions

of IASEP is that it is not an appropriate tool to evaluate student's educational progress. However, it is highly ranked in alignment with program design and for use as a consistent guide in setting goals and benchmarks. IASEP is not perfect, but it has promise.

Inclusive assessment and accountability can become a reality only when educators and parents understand the purpose of assessment and accountability systems, and the need to provide students with moderate and severe disabilities the opportunity to learn and be counted.

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Appendix A

IASEP Use and Support Questionnaire

Name _____ Date _____

School _____

Corporation _____

1. On average, how much time did you spend entering IASEP ratings for each student? _____

2. On average, how much time did you spend entering IASEP documentation (video, audio, scan, etc.) for each student? _____

3. How often do you:	<i>Weekly</i>	<i>Monthly</i>	<i>Quarterly</i>	<i>Once/Semester</i>
Update student ratings?				
Collect IASEP video documentation?				
Collect IASEP audio documentation?				
Scan IASEP documents?				
Enter text documentation?				

4. How comfortable do you feel:	<i>Very Uncomfortable</i>	<i>Somewhat Uncomfortable</i>	<i>Somewhat Comfortable</i>	<i>Very Comfortable</i>
Using the IASEP rating system?				
Using IASEP video?				
Using IASEP audio?				
Scanning documents into IASEP?				
Entering digital images into IASEP?				
Making text entries into IASEP?				

5. Have you shared IASEP documentation at case conferences, annual reviews, or parent teacher conferences?
Yes ___ No ___ If yes, how have parents responded?

6. How helpful was the <u>IASEP teacher training</u> in preparing you to implement the program:	<i>Not Helpful</i>	<i>Somewhat Helpful</i>	<i>Very Helpful</i>	<i>NA</i>
Two day training				
One day follow-up training				
After-school workshops				
Technology coordinator training				
Other				

7. How adequate has the level of ongoing support been in helping you complete IASEP this past year:

	<i>Inadequate</i>	<i>Somewhat Adequate</i>	<i>Very Adequate</i>
Technology support (e.g. use of computer, camera, scanner, microphone)			
Program support (e.g. entering ratings, demographic data, archiving/exporting)			
Administrative support (e.g. professional development time, classroom support, equipment funding)			

8. Do you have any suggestions for improving the support to teachers who are using IASEP?

9. To what extent are the following items barriers to integrating computer technology into your classroom:

	<i>Not a Barrier</i>	<i>Minor Barrier</i>	<i>Major Barrier</i>
Not enough or limited access to computer hardware.			
Computer hardware is not set up in a timely manner.			
Not enough or incompatible computer software.			
Instructional/assessment software is not installed in a timely manner.			
Lack of time for implementing technology in the classroom.			
Not enough teacher training opportunities.			
Lack of knowledge about ways to integrate technology in the classroom.			
Difficulty finding substitutes to allow teachers to attend trainings or other professional development activities.			
Difficulty balancing the use of computer technology with other instructional/support needs.			
Resistance from parents/guardians.			
Lack of administrative support for using computer technologies.			
Lack of adequate technical support for implementing computer technologies.			
Other:			

What student populations do you teach (e.g. SMH, MoMH)? _____

At what level(s) do you teach (e.g. high school, middle school)? _____

What is your average class size? _____

How many of these students are being included in IASEP this year? _____

How many computers do you have in your classroom? _____

Does your school have Internet access? Yes _____ No _____ If yes, how many of your classroom computers are connected to the Internet? _____

Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire. Your answers will help us identify ways to better assist teachers in implementing IASEP and other computer-based assessment and instructional management systems. Please return this questionnaire in the envelope with your IASEP data disk.

Appendix B

Appendix B: Interview Form

**Action Research Project
Interview Form**

Teacher Name: _____

Date Of Interview: _____

School: _____ Level: ES MS HS

Questions: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 15a

How many paraprofessionals do you have working in your room with your students?

One _____ Two _____ Three or More _____

Would you say you spent more time working on IASEP:

- (a) During school hours Monday thru Friday 8:00 to 3:00
- (b) After school hours (anytime after 3:00)
- (c) On weekends

If you answered (a) **approximately** how many hours were spent during the school day entering data into the IASEP program?

1-2 3-4 5-6 7-8 9-10 10+

If you answered (b) **approximately** how many "off hours" were spent entering data into the IASEP program?

1-2 3-4 5-6 7-8 9-10 10+

If you answered (c) **approximately** how many “weekend hours” were spent entering data into the IASEP program?

1-2 3-4 5-6 7-8 9-10 10+

What is the ethnic make-up of your students?

African American: _____ Caucasian: _____

Hispanic: _____ Other: _____

What is the gender make-up of your students?

Female: _____ Male: _____

Are there any other comments you want to make about the IASEP program in general?

Appendix C

Appendix C: Final Questionnaire

Dear IASEP/Project Participants:

I have two more questions that I need you to address. I promise this will be the last time I will ask you questions pertaining to my project. These two questions are the heart of my project please be truthful in your assessment. Remember all answers are confidential. THANKS ☺

1. How do you feel about the effectiveness about the alternative assessment as a way to evaluate the education progress of students with moderate and severe disabilities?
2. How does IASEP show the abilities of the students with moderate and severe disabilities in alignment with best practices, accountability and program design?



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